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Country note**

Belize

Summary

The Executive Director presents the country note for Belize for a programme of cooperation for the period 2002 to 2006.

The situation of children and women

1. Belize's location facilitates links with the English-speaking Caribbean and Central American countries, yet makes it vulnerable to hurricanes and floods. Of a population of 243,390, 48.3 per cent are under 18. The high growth rate of 2.7 per cent is partly a result of immigration from neighbouring countries, which has altered the population mix to the point that the former majority Creoles are now second to the Mestizo population. In an interesting reversal of trends, the rural population is growing in proportion to the urban. Recent growth in gross domestic product (GDP) doubled to 6.2 per cent in 1999. However, the Common Country Assessment indicates that sustaining this high growth will be difficult, since it was based on indirectly productive investments in such sectors as road and housing construction. Further, financing has been obtained through loans and sale of national assets, and the loans contribute to a foreign debt that in 1999 amounted to 35.5 per cent of GDP. Per capita income of $2,800 (1999) is unevenly distributed, with high urban/rural and regional disparities. While 33 per cent of the population is poor, among the

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** An addendum to the present report containing the final country programme recommendation will be submitted to the Executive Board for approval at its second regular session of 2001.

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Mayan population, the percentage rises to 53 per cent. The economy, which is based on tourism and export agriculture, is economically vulnerable to global market fluctuations.

2. Belize ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and was an early ratifier of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 1998, the Family and Children's Act was enacted, demonstrating national commitment to children's rights and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Belize is, however, far from ensuring all rights to all children. In its response to the 1998 national report, the Committee on the Rights of the Child specifically mentions challenges in child protection and juvenile justice.

3. Belize has a mixed record in achievement of World Summit for Children goals. The infant mortality rate (IMR) has been halved, from 42 per 1,000 live births in 1988 to 21.5 in 1998, and the under-five mortality rate (U5MR) fell to 24.5 per 1,000 live births, from 53 in 1988. However, in the southern districts, where many Mayans live, IMR is as high as 47 per 1,000 live births. Belize did not meet the 90 per cent immunization goal, but achieved a still respectable 85 per cent. Child nutrition has not improved, with 15.4 per cent of all children 6 to 9 years of age stunted (39 per cent among the Mayan population).

4. Maternal mortality is 134 per 100,000 live births, down from 190 in 1990. None of the country's hospitals has been certified as "baby-friendly". Iron deficiency is a serious problem, and 51 per cent of pregnant women in the southern regions have anaemia. Safe motherhood is especially worrisome for adolescent mothers, who account for 20 per cent of all pregnancies. Belize has among the highest HIV/AIDS infection rate in Central America.

5. The net primary enrolment rate is 85 per cent, with no gender disparities in enrolment and completion. The relatively low primary enrolment reflects, in part, weak early childhood care: only 23 per cent of children 3 to 5 years of age have access to pre-school. Between 1995 and 1998, primary school absenteeism was above 20 per cent, while in secondary schools it was 44 per cent. Secondary schools enrol only 40 per cent of all children, and drop-out rates are high, especially for boys. The rate of illiteracy has increased from 23 per cent to an estimated 29 per cent, partly due the significant immigration from Spanish-speaking Central America. Difficulty in delivering services to the rural-based immigrants also contributes to some of the primary schooling challenges. The drop-out rate and illiteracy have left a number of young people untrained and ill prepared to enter the workforce. While the adult unemployment rate slightly increased from 7.9 per cent to 9 per cent between 1993 and 1999, the youth unemployment rate increased from 13.8 per cent to 20.3 per cent. Among all age groups, the rate of female unemployment is twice that of males.

6. A high crime rate, especially among adolescents, causes great social concern. Belize relies too heavily on penal institutions and currently ranks sixth in world prison population, and second in the Caribbean. Children can be imprisoned from the age of 10, and many are regularly sentenced to imprisonment because non-prison alternatives are not available. Reported cases of domestic violence and child abuse have grown threefold in the last two years, partly because of increased urbanization and breakdown of traditional family structures, but also due to heightened sensitivity to the issue and the promotion of reporting mechanisms. Concerted effort

on the part of the Government to combat abuse has led to an increased number of children in foster care.

7. Despite advances in child survival, there are a number of areas that call for increased attention in order to ensure the full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Priorities include early childhood care and full basic service coverage for excluded populations. Reducing the underlying factors that give rise to high crime rates, domestic abuse, and the inadequate juvenile justice system are alarming. The quality of basic and secondary education also needs to be addressed, particularly as it causes high drop-out rates and contributes to the consequent lack of preparedness for the workforce. Finally, HIV/AIDS, which is rapidly increasing among all age groups, requires a vigorous counter-response, especially among the young.

Lessons learned from past cooperation

8. A review of national laws revealed gaps and problems that led to adoption of the Family and Children's Act. Yet not all laws are in conformity with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other relevant international conventions. The review process — which has become a model for other Caribbean nations — should be extended. The major lesson learned was the key role played by capacity-building in legal reform and review, which included establishing posts within partner ministries and other organizations that offered services to children.

9. UNICEF, through a process of advocacy and lobbying with the Government, has been successful in securing increased allocations for social sector ministries. Despite these advances, Belize needs to refine its social budget analysis procedures to include tracking the percentage of funds reaching children and the most needy, and to monitor cost effectiveness. Budget analysis needs to be complemented by reliable data collection, which has proven critical in generating momentum for those new initiatives where need can be demonstrated.

10. The country programme has been instrumental in facilitating intersectoral coordination by convening and/or cosponsoring coordination initiatives. This has led to programmes that have proven that horizontal cooperation is a workable model. The success of the Community and Parent Empowerment Project (COMPAR) is a prime example of joint implementation by Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). COMPAR illustrates an evolving model where the Government contracts with an NGO to deliver a service under state supervision. As decentralized planning/implementation and public-NGO partnerships will expand, the limited government presence in some parts of the country and administrative weakness of NGOs are problems that need to be addressed. The new country programme must support institutional strengthening of partners at national and district level, while endorsing the public-NGO model.

11. A related problem is a relative shortage of activities specifically targeting adolescents, as well as adolescent participation in programme planning and implementation. As new approaches are sought to resolve such social problems as youth violence, and as the Belize partnership model is expanded, efforts must be made to include adolescents. Belize is in a good position to do this, given the openness of the Government and society towards new approaches.

Proposed country programme strategy

12. The programme of cooperation for 2002-2006 has been developed within the context of UNICEF global priorities and national priorities of the Government, such as its strategic plan to end poverty (2000-2004). It also reflects the views of civil society counterparts and derives from the principles of the two Conventions. Government endorsement has been secured, and state and civil society partners have signalled their willingness to make the programme a centrepiece in the Belize implementation of the New Global Agenda for Children.

13. The vision guiding the country programme is a country where every child from every cultural background enjoys the highest attainable standard of health and nutrition, and reaches full emotional, social and intellectual development, in a safe and caring environment. The strategic role of UNICEF is to help the Government and society expand their vision of rights fulfilment and support programme efforts to identify solutions that the people of Belize can take to scale and sustain for permanent realization of rights.

14. The proposed country programme has two specific objectives: to support the provision of safe and supportive environments for children at two key stages of the life cycle (the early years and adolescence); and to support the provision of opportunities for adolescent participation within their families, schools and communities. The main operational strategies rule out direct support to service delivery, except in pilot programmes for geographic targeting to reach excluded populations. The main strategies will be advocacy for new public policies; social mobilization of civil society groups and organizations; technical assistance in developing strategies in newer areas such as adolescent participation; and institutional strengthening in support of decentralization and public-civil society programme cooperation, and in support of monitoring and evaluation.

15. Because primary education has strong support from other development partners, there is not a specific focus for this age group, but the two major programmes will extend their interventions as needed when it is logical to include such support. A series of crosscutting themes - gender, HIV/AIDS and disparity reduction - will permeate all levels of action. An important element of the new country programme is the reinforcement of a culture of participation to secure ownership and sustainability of interventions.

16. The *enhancing holistic child development programme* will place emphasis on 0-6-year-olds, with a focus on legislation and the development of policies and curricula for day-care centres. Taking into account the important role of families and communities, the programme will include parenting education projects, promotion of male involvement in childcare, and the establishment of community-based and nationwide initiatives to prevent domestic violence. The programme will also focus on helping children in the transition from home or pre-school to organized primary education. It will include support to institutional strengthening and to the collection and analysis of social statistics.

17. A major objective of the *enabling environments for adolescent development programme* is facilitating development of individual capacity in safe and supportive environments. The programme includes support to adolescent participation initiatives, child-friendly schools, "second chance" education projects and reproductive health, related specifically to prevention of teenage pregnancy and

HIV/AIDS. The juvenile justice system will be reoriented, away from incarceration with adults and towards treatment alternatives. Support will be given to training and services to prevent violence, abuse and exploitation; and to methods of coping with violence when it occurs.

18. Under cross-sectoral costs, UNICEF will support crosscutting efforts benefiting both programmes. Building on increasing collaboration through the United Nations Development Assistance Framework and theme-based initiatives, the country office will strengthen existing partnerships, especially with regards to HIV/AIDS and adolescence.

Estimated programme budget

Estimated programme cooperation, 2002-2006[a]

(In thousands of United States dollars)

	Regular resources	*Other resources*	*Total*
Enhancing holistic child development	1 135	500	1 635
Enabling environments for adolescent development	1 250	750	2 000
Cross-sectoral costs	625	-	625
Total	**3 010**	**1 250**	**4 260**

[a] These are indicative figures only which are subject to change once aggregate financial data are finalized.